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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000017

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIFR](#) [VT](#)  
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: CONVERSATIONS ON INTERFAITH RELATIONS

REF: Vatican 005 and previous

VATICAN 00000017 001.2 OF 002

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary. Senior Holy See officials and scholars discussed interfaith relations with the visiting Deputy Assistant to VP Cheney, Joseph Wood, January 14-15. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran and Father Miguel Ayuso described the increasing Church engagement with the signers of "A Common Word", commenting on both the opportunity presented by this initiative and some of the difficulties posed by dialogue with Islam. Cardinal Tauran and Bishop Brian Farrell described relations with Orthodox Christians -- generally positive with Greek Orthodox, more nascent and tentative with Russian Orthodox. Interreligious dialogue, thought to be in disfavor in Rome just two years ago, is now quite prominent, and has important political aspects. End summary.

12. (U) During a January 14-15 visit to Rome, Deputy Assistant to the Vice President Joseph Wood discussed the Holy See's relations with Muslims in meetings with Father Miguel Ayuso -- Rector of the Pontifical Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies (PISAI) -- and with Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Wood also discussed Catholic-Orthodox relations with Bishop Brian Farrell, Vice President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Charge d'affaires also attended these meetings.

Relations with Islam

13. (C) Father Ayuso noted that "A Common Word Between You and Us" was a dramatic step that had created a "golden chance" for relations between Christianity and Islam. The document (see reftel) now has 211 signatories, up from the original 138, and the number is growing steadily. The document has now been disseminated throughout the world and is attracting increasing attention. Three of the original 138 signatories would be coming to Rome for preliminary talks with the Holy See: one Italian, one Jordanian, and one Libyan. (Note: from Italy - Imam Yahya Pallavicini, from Libya - Dr. Aref Ali Nayed.) Two working teams have been set up at the same time, one at PISAI itself, the other at the Aal al-Bayt Foundation in Amman. Later in the spring, a larger Muslim delegation would come to Rome for a more formal session with the Holy See.

14. (C) Ayuso noted that the signers of "A Common Word" are generally very knowledgeable about Christianity. However, many Muslims do not, and Muslims interested in dialogue will have to work to overcome the reluctance and fears of others in their own community; the same is true for Christians. The Orthodox, for example, have responded only hesitantly. Still, Ayuso had not heard of any overt opposition within the Muslim world to "A

Common Word". Ayuso emphasized the need for Christians to support open-minded Muslims and help Islam progress after centuries of intellectual stagnation. The Islamic world needs reform, and the signers of "A Common Word" have taken the initiative to accelerate that reform. Christians should not miss this chance to help that process. At the same time, the Christian response must proceed at the right pace; it will not do to rush ahead. Expectations have already become high. Apart from the delicacy of the Christian-Muslim dialogue itself, each side must also take great care to coordinate internally -- by no means an easy task.

15. (C) Cardinal Tauran observed that there is "no separation" between religion and politics in Islam, and that in dealing with Islam one is always in a sense dealing with the entire population. He said Muslims tend to be very sensitive, having a kind of inferiority complex. Tauran recalled that after his own comments to the French daily La Croix (October 2007) suggesting theological difficulties in Catholic-Muslim dialogue, Muslims were "very offended" and challenged his right to define their faith.

16. (C) "A Common Word" changed the reality for everyone, and now "we are condemned to dialogue" as Tauran put it. Pope Benedict XVI is adamant that this dialogue develop properly, and it will be a great challenge for the Church for the next fifty years. The Church has an obligation to help in the formation of younger Muslims, and to aid the renaissance of intellectual life in Islam. (Note: Tauran was careful to distinguish between Arabs and Iranians in this context, observing that Persian culture has always been very sophisticated.) The Church must work with Gulf countries, which are open-minded; and with the new generation. Much depends on the Saudis. Tauran said he was not privy to last November's conversation between Saudi King Abdullah and the Pope, but understood that the conversation had remained at a fairly abstract level and was also thus far essentially confined to the two principals; there was no lower-level substantive coordination, nor has there been detailed followup.

17. (C) Apart from theological issues, Tauran said American Middle East policy is a major factor in dialogue with Islam. Muslim publics look at the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq --

VATICAN 00000017 002.2 OF 002

with US forces on the soil of Muslim countries -- and tend to see them as instances of Christianity versus Islam. Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian situation is the most critical factor. More specifically, resolution of this conflict would certainly lead to improvements in interreligious dialogue, and, conversely, failure to progress toward resolution would inevitably limit the potential of interfaith dialogue. Tauran expressed great interest in President Bush's recent Middle East travel and his remarks during that trip. He suggested that President Bush must have seen first-hand the difficulties of ordinary Palestinian life when his own motorcade had to pass through Israeli checkpoints at Ramallah. The Israelis, said the cardinal, claim that access to international holy places has never been so easy as it is now, with those holy places under Israeli control; but this is simply not true in his opinion, even though "they don't like it when I say so".

Relations with Orthodox

18. (C) Bishop Farrell said dialogue with the Orthodox falls into two distinct patterns. With the Byzantine world, dialogue is going very well, perhaps even too fast to keep up with. The exchange programs for students and priests established by Catholics in past decades are now being reciprocated by the Orthodox. With the Russian world, things are more formal and difficult. They consider themselves the true Orthodox; the Greek Orthodox are in a weak position to contest this, given their problems with Turkish policy. The Russian church acts as an arm of Putin's policy, though the situation has improved lately. Catholic dialogue with Russian Orthodox tends to stumble unnecessarily when, for example, minor disagreements are

blown out of proportion. (For example, the Missionaries of Charity -- Mother Teresa's organization -- are not really engaged in missionary work, i.e. conversions, but the name has caused problems in Russia.)

¶9. (C) Farrell said the Russian church is "free" for the first time in centuries. The younger generation is more interested in relations with Rome. Thinking for example of Russia's harsh demographic realities, Farrell noted that the Russian church will need to step up its ministry to the spiritual needs of the country in the hard years that lie ahead. Farrell mused that Catholics expect the faithful to participate as individuals in their religion, whereas Russian Orthodox retain a more collective understanding of religious identity. In addition, many of their priests are old and never received any proper religious formation. The Knights of Malta are helping address this problem.

¶10. (C) Cardinal Tauran also commented on relations with the Orthodox, saying they have their own channels for interfaith dialogue, but are beginning to take seriously the idea of cooperating with other Christian denominations in this regard. Tauran said he met (Greek Orthodox) Patriarch Bartholomew last fall in Naples and discussed this, and had also talked about it with (Russian Orthodox) Patriarch Alexy. Like Farrell, Tauran pointed out that the Russian Orthodox were essentially cocooned for 70 years, and it will take time for them to fully reintegrate into interfaith dialogues; they have an inferiority complex of their own.

Comment

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¶11. (C) As the above conversations make clear, the Holy See is very serious about its various dialogues with other major religions. The dialogue with the Orthodox is relatively mature, with some modest signs of progress now evident on centuries-old disputes -- though the path ahead will be long and difficult. With Islam, on the other hand, the "Common Word" initiative has emerged rather suddenly and has stimulated real enthusiasm, mixed with deep-rooted caution. Tauran's skepticism is evident, but his commitment is genuine. Post will continue to report on these interfaith relationships with particular attention to their political echoes, and looks forward to hearing from other posts about local reaction to these trends.  
SANDROLINI